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C O N F I D E N T I A L MOSCOW 003636

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL KDEM PHUM RS
SUBJECT: DISSENTERS' DAY PROTESTS LEAD TO ARRESTS IN MOSCOW

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor
Alice G. Wells for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Police arrested more than 150 people across Moscow on December 14 in separate Dissenters' Day protests, with an additional 60 protesters arrested in St. Petersburg. In the largest Moscow protest, organized by Garry Kasparov and Eduard Limonov, police detained approximately 100 Other Russia protesters and at least two journalists. One protester reportedly was beaten severely by police. Police shut down other protests across Moscow, including one staged by the Union of Soviet Officers. Russian television news did not cover any of the protests, helping to ensure that this Dissenters' Day will soon be forgotten by most Russians as quickly as past ones have been. President Medvedev has failed an early test in establishing a more tolerant policy on dissent, with fears of economic-motivated protests generating a thuggish response. We will continue to raise our concerns with GOR officials. End Summary.

Mass Arrests Smother Protest Led By Kasparov and Limonov

¶12. (SBU) On the December 14 anniversary of the 1825 Decembrist uprising, Moscow police detained more than 100 protesters from the Other Russia opposition coalition as they attempted to march on Triumphal Square in downtown Moscow. Most participants reportedly were members of Garry Kasparov's United Civil Front (OGF) and Eduard Limonov's banned National Bolshevik Party; while Limonov has not been welcomed into the new opposition Solidarity grouping, Kasparov continues to rely on the radical National Bolshevik leader to generate youthful protesters unafraid of arrest or a bruising encounter with security forces. The city government had denied Other Russia's application to march from the square to Tverskaya Street, offering instead a much less visible location in a park near the White House. Kasparov and Limonov pressed on with plans for the original location.

¶13. (SBU) Riot police had cordoned off Triumphal Square with vehicles and barriers well before 2 p.m., the planned start time for a protest that Kasparov and Limonov had hoped would attract 2,000 protesters. Any protesters attempting to access the square, however, were detained. Nezavisimaya Gazeta reported that Limonov arrived with an entourage of bodyguards, but was promptly recognized and arrested as he approached the square. Kasparov was not at the scene and therefore not arrested. Around 3 p.m., with no more protesters on the square, police detained at least two journalists, one from grani.ru.

¶14. (SBU) The article of Russian law under which arrests were made allowed for either a fine or a few days of arrest. It is unknown whether any of the detainees are still in custody or if they all paid the fine to be released. Police reported that they arrested approximately 90 people on Triumphal Square, but media reported numbers between 100-120. According to Ekho Moskvy, OGF member Suren Edigarov received a severe concussion from blows delivered by police.

Pro-Kremlin Counter-Protesters Detained After Heckling

¶ 15. (SBU) The pro-Kremlin Molodaya Rossiya (Young Russia) group held a counter-protest on the square, distributing flyers from the roof of an adjacent building and hectoring the protesters below through a megaphone. According to *Kommersant*, State Duma Deputy Maksim Mishchenko led the Young Russia protesters and railed against opposition "politicians who serve America." Police detained Mishchenko but later released him.

Additional December 14 Protests

¶ 16. (SBU) Other protests and arrests occurred across the capital:

-- On Pushkin Square, the Union of Soviet Officers staged a separate protest. According to media reports, police detained approximately 50 protesters, including Admiral Vladimir Berezin and General Aleksey Fomin, the group's leader.

-- At Paveletskaya train station, Anti-War Action Committee leader Mikhail Krieger marshaled approximately 150 protesters, chanting "We need another Russia!" Press reported these protesters dispersed before any arrests were made.

-- At 5:30 p.m., approximately 30 Other Russia protesters marched to the Kremlin, where police detained 18 of them.

-- At Prospekt Mira metro station, three members of the Oborona movement were detained, along with three bystanders.

Comment

¶ 17. (C) Unsurprisingly, Russian television news did not cover any of the protests, helping to ensure that this Dissenters' Day will soon be forgotten by most Russians as quickly as past ones have been. However, for liberals hopeful of a more accommodating policy towards public dissent, Medvedev has failed an early test of distinguishing himself from Putin's unapologetic crackdowns. With the GOR palpably nervous over the prospect of economic crisis-induced social unrest, the instinctive response to muzzle all dissent -- no matter how isolated -- remains. We will note our strong concern over GOR actions, including in a meeting with Human Rights Ombudsman Lukin this week.

BEYRLE